

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost – 2018

Jeremiah 31:7-9 - Mark 10:46-52

When we gather to baptize a little one, as we are today. There is a sense in which we glimpse the future. In the person of Nevaeh we see the future. Her baptism is a sign of hope, but also challenge. Responsibilities are placed on her parents and Godparents indeed on us all. In her we see the future, but what does that look like? What future are we helping prepare for her?

“Prophets are sometimes unpopular and can be ridiculed by those who have much to lose if people really were to *open their eyes*. But they are those who consistently, and without fear, speak what they believe to be the truth.” So wrote Susan Durber in a report published by Christian Aid in the UK examining the links between theology and climate change. The report made it very plain that the call for climate justice is something that echoes clearly the challenges found in the biblical prophets to a *complacent and short-sighted society*.

Jeremiah was certainly unpopular and ridiculed in his day, he could see in the injustice of his day, a dark future. A prophet is a person who sees the future implicit in the present and their authenticity is confirmed when their prophecy comes true; this is what Biblical prophecy is all about. The people of Jerusalem were taken into captivity in Babylon because they ignored the warnings of the prophets and today we read of their returning. But God’s people are no longer the rich and famous and the powerful: See, says Jeremiah

I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
those with child and those in labour, together;
a great company, they shall return here.

Please don’t call at the Rectory when Michael Portillo is on the SBS travelling by train throughout the British Isles. If you do you will be ushered into the family room and you’ll have to sit quietly and watch it with me. I am allowed to have my dinner on my lap when Great British Railway journeys is on! What a joy! When Susan and I were in London earlier in the year we, or rather I, was able to marvel at the architecture of the London railway stations. When the Victorians built them they were the largest buildings in the country finally surpassing the great medieval cathedrals. As you alight from the Eurostar from Paris at London’s St Pancras station you are greeted by a statute of the one-time Poet Laureate Sir John Betjeman. The statute has him standing in a breeze his coat tails flapping, holding on to his hat as he looks up at the wonderful architecture of St Pancras. He was instrumental in saving this wonderful building in the 1960s, a building incidentally designed by Sir Gilbert Scott the great Victorian church architect. ‘Look up’ was the catch cry of Betjeman he wanted people to look up and in doing so see another perspective, hence the statute of him looking up. It is I believe great

metaphor for the Christian life. All too often we fail to see the bigger picture, the thing of beauty, a new perspective because we are too busy with our heads down! This is the message of our gospel today.

Our reading of this chapter 10 of Mark's gospel concludes with today's passage, the story of the blind Bartimaeus. Mark is a very clever writer and has brought together in the person of Bartimaeus the issues besetting the society of his day. Bartimaeus' healing by Jesus turns out to be a sign not just to his disciples but to the wider community, the people of Israel. Jesus has been speaking of wealth and power and relationship during this journey towards Jerusalem in this chapter. He has responded to the religious leaders of the day about relationship, he spoke to the rich young man about wealth and to James and John about power. In each case there is a blindness. The Pharisees questioned Jesus about divorce. Their blindness meant that they failed to see beyond the letter of the law. The rich young man questioned Jesus about eternal life and Jesus tells him that his wealth was blinding him to the possibilities of life in its fullest and James and John were blinded by their desire for authority; and then along comes poor old Bartimaeus who really is blind!

Now the text is interesting here. The word that Mark uses for blind is one that is also used to describe those who willfully refuse to see, 'there's none so blind as those who will not see.' The word used for 'seeing' is used by Mark when Jesus 'looks up,' as he does at the feeding of the 5000 - 'and looking up to heaven Jesus gave thanks'. So here we have Jesus responding to the society around him, the religious leaders, the wealthy and therefore influential in the community and those would-be followers, his disciples with a capital D. He is saying to them seeing involves intentionally looking up, looking to God. This involves surrendering one's life - this is what relationship is all about not rules, surrendering one's possessiveness - not being bound by your stuff, and surrendering the need to be in charge - understanding what true authority is all about.

Now Jesus is a prophet and when he displays acts of kindness or compassion they are acts of criticism, they are among other things demonstrations of his frustration at the society of his time. He highlights their blindness in relationships, wealth and power and asks where is it leading you? The same question is asked of us. Whether it's climate, economics, international relations, refugees, true prophets today open our eyes to see the future implicit in the present and call us to action. By ignoring them we fail the vulnerable, we fail Nevaeh.

In the healing of Bartimaeus or more accurately in his response to Jesus, in his 'looking up' we see someone who has responded to that call, in Jesus he too can suddenly see the future implicit in the present, he joins Jesus on the way and receives the healing of his resurrection. Amen.